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ABSTRACT

An overview is provided, examining the types of associate degrees that are awarded, the number that are awarded, the students who receive them, and the problems related to associate degree curricula. First, a list is provided of the different types of associate degrees awarded, followed by an enumeration of the vocational and non-vocational categories into which these degrees are divided: Arts and Sciences or General Programs for non-vocational degrees; and Data Processing, Health Sciences/Paramedical, Mechanical/Engineering, Natural Science, Business and Commerce, and Public Service for vocational degrees. Next, information is provided on degree awards, indicating that in absolute numbers, 158,000 non-vocational and 276,493 vocational degrees were awarded in 1981-82. The next section looks at trends in the participation of women in associate degree education, showing that since 1976-77, over 50% of the degrees have been earned by women, though most in health, office, and public service occupations. The final section addresses several issues that must be addressed in the future planning of associate degree programs, including the relatively low prestige of the degree, variations among colleges with respect to subject area and unit requirements, the need to keep up with technological advances in vocational curricula, and the transferability of the degree. (EJV)

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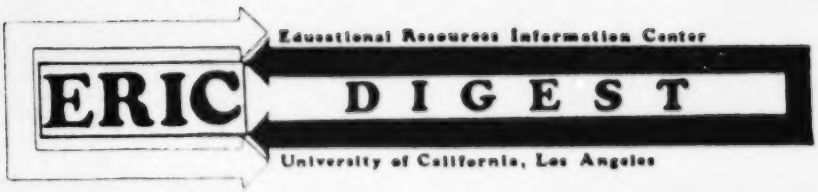
THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE ASSOCIATE DEGREE



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THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE ASSOCIATE DEGREE

How many associate degrees are awarded by institutions of higher education in the United States? What areas are those degrees awarded in? Who receives associate degrees? This ERIC Digest draws upon available sources of national data to answer these and other questions often asked about the associate degree by community college practitioners.

WHAT TYPES OF ASSOCIATE DEGREES ARE AWARDED

The associate degree is most often awarded to students completing postsecondary programs requiring at least one but no more than two years of full-time study. Wittstruck (1985) notes that the associate degree goes by several different names:

- Associate of/in Technical Studies
- Associate in General Education
- Associate of/in General Studies
- Associate of Individualized Study
- Associate of Applied (name of specialty)
- Associate of/in Applied Science
- Associate of/in Applied Arts
- Associate in Technical Arts
- Associate of/in Technology
- Associate of/in (name of specialty)
- Associate of/in Occupational Studies
- Associate of/in Science
- Associate of/in Arts
- Associate of Arts and Sciences
- Associate in Specialized Business
- Associate in Specialized Technology
- Associate in Nursing
- Associate of Science in Nursing

Data on associate degrees are frequently disaggregated by curriculum: vocational or nonvocational. The Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS) counts nonvocational degrees under the category "Arts and Sciences or General Programs"; vocational degrees are counted under six headings:

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- Data Processing Technologies
- Health Services/Paramedical Technologies
- Mechanical/Engineering Technologies
- Natural Science Technologies
- Business and Commerce Technologies
- Public Service-related Technologies

HOW MANY ASSOCIATE DEGREES ARE AWARDED?

The number of associate degrees awarded rose rapidly in the 1970s. In 1981-82 (the most recent year for which comprehensive data are available), 434,515 associate degrees were awarded, representing a 25 percent increase over the number of associate degrees awarded during 1973-74. All of the increase is accounted for by growth in the number of vocational degrees awarded. Between 1973-74 and 1981-82, percent changes in the number of associate degrees awarded were as follows:

• arts and sciences or general programs	-4.5%
• data processing technologies	225%
• mechanical and engineering technologies	86%
• business and commerce technologies	39%
• health services and paramedical technologies	31%
• natural sciences technologies	30%
• public service-related technologies	-7%

In terms of absolute numbers, 158,000 nonvocational and 276,493 vocational associate degrees were awarded in 1981-82. Of the vocational degrees awarded, 35% were in business and commerce technologies, 22% were in health services and paramedical technologies; 21% were in mechanical and engineering technologies; 9% were in public service-related technologies; 5% were in natural science technologies; and 8% were in data processing technologies.

The growing popularity of vocational degrees is not necessarily a sign of the diminution of the transfer function, because many occupational students transfer to senior institutions. Indeed, a study conducted by the State University of New York (SUNY) found that 29 percent of SUNY community college students receiving vocational associate degrees in 1980 transferred to a four-year institution (SUNY Comunity College Graduates ... (1982)). Illinois data also shed light on transfers with vocational associate degrees. Of the 3,871 students who transferred with an associate degree from an Illinois community college to an Illinois senior institution in Fall 1979, 19 percent (727) held the associate in applied science (AAS) degree. While the baccalaureate attainment rate for AAS transfers (19%) was lower than the baccalaureate attainment rate of those transfers with associate of arts or associate of science degrees (31%), it was higher than the attainment rate of those community college transfers who had earned no associate degree at all (11%) (Bragg, 1982).

WHO RECEIVES ASSOCIATE DEGREES?

Since 1976-77, over 50 percent of associate degrees have been earned by women. Though female students are beginning to enter occupational curricula

in which women have been traditionally underrepresented, most women who obtain occupational associate degrees remain in health, office and public service occupations. The 1981-82 data reveal that women made up:

- 88% of the recipients in health services and paramedical technologies (compared to 89% in 1971-72)
- 65% of the recipients in business and commerce technologies (compared to 47% in 1971-72)
- 52% of the recipients in public service-related technologies (compared to 38.6% in 1971-72)
- 50% of the degree recipients in data processing technologies (compared to 30% in 1971-72)
- 41% of the degree recipients in natural science technologies (compared to 24% in 1971-72)
- 9% of the degree recipients in mechanical and engineering technologies (compared to 2% in 1971-72).

Of the nonvocational associate degrees awarded in 1981-82, 54% were awarded to women (compared to 43% in 1971-72).

PROBLEMS FACING ASSOCIATE DEGREE CURRICULA

Koltai (1984) presents a comprehensive analysis of the current status of the associate degree. He reports several issues that need to be addressed as community college educators plan associate degree programs for the future. These issues include:

(1) the relatively low prestige of the degree in higher education;

(2) college-by-college variation in subject area and unit requirements;

(3) the fact that many colleges and universities prefer their own transfer requirements rather than accepting the associate degree as qualifying students for transfer;

(4) the need to keep up with high technology in vocational associate degree programs;

(5) the need to incorporate general education and communications skills instruction in associate degree programs;

(6) the desirability of competency-based programs that certify the learning outcomes of associate degree programs;

(7) the need for more honor sections to attract and retain gifted students in associate degree programs.

In light of these issues, Koltai recommends that colleges establish testing and placement procedures for entering students, specify competency standards for degree graduates, improve the pre-service and in-service professional development of community college faculty, and establish associate degree committees to work with faculty, students, four-year institutions and businesses in improving counseling, job-placement, and transfer.

SOURCES

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